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The Constant Crisis of the Liberal Arts

By John V. Lombrdi May 18, 2007
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The liberal arts have been in crisis in American colleges and universities in one way or another throughout my academic life. Whether challenged by

Sputnik, assaulted by the rise of vocationally oriented education, or rejected by the fine arts as irrelevant to performance, we in the liberal arts have found ourselves playing defense for a long time. We watched as many of our traditional liberal arts courses declined in enrollment, we saw our graduate student populations decline, and we witnessed the rise of an instrumental argument for the liberal arts (it turns out liberal arts are practical).

The commitment from our institutions, enshrined in the core, distribution, or general education requirements, became a curricular battlefield over the ability of the academy to absorb the dramatic social, political, and cultural transformations of the late 20th century. We fretted as the nation turned towards a crusade to enhance the STEM disciplines which divided the liberal arts and sciences into two camps: the nationally significant mathematically based disciplines and the perhaps useful and charming but less important social, behavioral, and humanistic studies.

We learned that college was critical to the nation's future and that everyone should have an opportunity to attend, but we also learned that we should add programs and activities to support those students arriving from high school with one or many academic deficiencies. We found ourselves asked to support economic development in our communities and state, we responded to calls for community involvement and service learning, we engaged in outreach to many off-campus constituencies, and we pursued various forms of distance learning. All this effort produced dramatically increased enrollments in higher education but also constant discontent from one or another of our many constituencies. Ideologues of all persuasions found our values suspect, employers found our graduates not as well prepared as expected, governments complained that students graduated with different levels of skill and performance and that some did not graduate at all, testing concerns lobbied for regulated uniformity through standardized outcome measurements, and our national associations and other interested groups issued call after call for dramatic reform, re-dedication, reconfiguration, and renewal.

One elegant and comprehensive call to arms for the liberal arts comes from the [Association of American Colleges and Universities](#) (AACU) perhaps the most focused on liberal arts of the lobbying organizations in Washington DC. Their campaign carries the inspiring title [Liberal Education and America's Promise](#) (LEAP) and their challenge appears in the publication, [College Learning for the New Global Century](#) (2007) available online. This report is wonderful in its rhetoric, purposes, and recognition of the many remarkable things being done for liberal education across the nation. It outlines The Essential Learning Outcomes, seven Principles of Excellence, and fifteen

Recommendations to implement these principles. The AACU LEAP leadership council includes representatives of colleges and universities of varying types and sizes. All in all, it is a fine report. One of its great strengths is that it makes a strong case for flexible, effective, and specific outcomes measurement tailored to the particular academic objectives of the widely varying institutions in the country and makes an effective critique of the simple, one test serves all, methodology proposed by many accountability advocates.

Still, as I read through this report, cheering on my colleagues whose broad definition of the liberal arts seems to encompass everything a modern college or university does, some nagging doubt restrained my enthusiasm. Although presented as a remarkably new proposal, much of the rationale and content have been part of our liberal arts rhetoric and agenda for at least a generation or two, and most of the principles, perhaps ineffectively implemented, have provided the justification for every college and university's general education or core requirements. The described innovations, admirable in every way, actually exist in most colleges and universities in some form or another, providing undergraduates with real world experience, taking multidisciplinary courses, working on team projects, and otherwise broadening and deepening their engagement with multiple facets of the curriculum. That these admirable accomplishments should get more attention and visibility is surely a good thing, and that our colleagues have been enhancing curriculum and the opportunities for students to meet the goals echoed by this report is reason to rejoice.

The great challenge for the achievement of all these fine principles and recommendations comes from more practical considerations. Almost everyone would agree with these broad recommendations and principles, for they have been the stuff of our discussions on these topics for years, but not everyone will see a clear method for implementation. While the LEAP document asks us to put our experiments into a complete reform of the undergraduate process, this is not as easy as it might appear. Most colleges and universities have 120 hours, more or less, to provide all the things everyone wants from their undergraduate experience. Most of the recommendations in the report speak of adding onto the current curriculum, by enhancing the core and extending the principles of liberal learning into the structure of majors. Indeed, LEAP reinforces the importance of the strong in-depth major. The challenge may be worth accepting, but it is not trivial, and especially for large complex universities, the integrative approach presented here may prove somewhat more difficult to achieve. Most colleges and universities are doing some of the things recommended in this report, but not many are implementing them all in a systematic fashion.

This is not for lack of leadership, imagination, or good will, but instead, it reflects the real practical and economic challenges of implementing comprehensive, sweeping reforms. All of us appreciate the call to arms of the AACU, we who are of the traditional liberal arts cannot help but resonate to the rhetoric, but we look forward with anticipation to the development of a strategy that will help us find the money and the space within our highly regulated environments to engage the fundamental reforms outlined here.